

VZCZCXR05061
RR RUEHMA RUEHPA
DE RUEHFN #0364 2571437
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
R 141437Z SEP 09
FM AMEMBASSY FREETOWN
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 2875
INFO RUEHZK/ECOWAS COLLECTIVE

UNCLAS FREETOWN 000364

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: PGOV PHSA EWWT SL

SUBJECT: SMALL BOAT CAPSIZES: OVER 200 PASSENGERS BELIEVED DEAD

¶1. Summary: On September 8 a small boat capsized off the coast of Sierra Leone, killing over 200 passengers on board. Overloading of both passengers and cargo, improper monitoring, poor weather and a slow rescue response have been blamed for the disaster. The country is in mourning as the chance of finding further survivors disappeared over the weekend. End Summary.

¶2. A boat capsized on September 8 in the Yawri Bay, Moyamba District, while carrying passengers to the large fishing community of Tombo outside of Freetown. Two different manifests were retrieved from the almost sunken boat by a naval rescue team the following day. In one, a legal Sierra Leone Maritime Administration document, 41 passengers were registered. The other, written in an ordinary school exercise book, had 251 adults registered, though this number excluded the large quantity of students and small infants reportedly also along for the ride. The illegal manifest also contained the boat's cargo meant for trading at the ship's destination, which included over 4000 gallons of palm oil, dozens of bags of groundnuts, cement, and fish. The small outboard boat, called a "panpam," was only meant to carry a maximum of 125 passengers. News reports have indicated that 37 people have been rescued, while only 8 bodies have been recovered. The remaining passengers are believed dead, including over 50 children.

¶3. Though reports about the accident vary, reliable sources indicate that the boat capsized around midday. The boat lacked a communications device and news of the incident only reached awaiting relatives and friends in Tombo around 20:00 that night. At that point, there was little naval officers in the area could do until morning, as the only "rescue" vessel available was a small fiberglass boat which would be dangerously exposed during a night mission. The navy was therefore forced to wait until early morning on September 9 to begin looking for survivors - roughly 20 hours after the accident.

¶4. Sierra Leonean law sets regulations for panpams and the common routes are supposed to be monitored by officials from the Ministry of Transport and Aviation. The capsized boat was apparently allowed to leave port without monitoring or sufficient life vests on board. Due to government shortfalls, no monitor was assigned to the port of departure, Kargboro, so the responsibility of enforcement rested with the receiving port of Tombo. The public is outraged over the incident, placing blame on both the Sierra Leone Maritime Administration Monitors and boat owners who allow boats to regularly be overloaded. Many throughout the country are calling for tougher laws to prosecute those guilty of overloading, though the government's ability to implement such laws is limited.

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